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FROM

Amembassy GUATEMALA

SUBJECT

Monthly Report on Political Violence

Rights: April 1977

REF

SUMMARY: There were 26 press-reported incidents of probable political violence in April, up slightly from March, but still the seventh consecutive month in which the number of incidents remained below 30. About half the incidents occurred in two related clashes in Chiquimula where 11 campesinos were killed in a clash over water rights. The EGP issued a long communique and may have been responsible for the murder of four military commissioners in El Quiche and on the south coast.

END SUMMARY

April was a very unusual month for political violence because nearly half the incidents of violence were accounted for by two related clashes in which 11 people were murdered, and because the 11 people slain were killed not for their involvement in partisan political activity, but because they were caught up in a less publicized type of political conflict, one that only occasionally explodes onto the front pages. This is the war between the patron and the campesino, between the landowner and the tenant farmer, a "war" caused by the profound economic and social divisions that have existed in Guatemala for years.

These divisions are most evident in the Oriente, especially in Chiquimula and Zacapa, an area of mostly small landowners and communal farmers where land and water have been fought over for generations and where in many instances violence seems to be the first recourse to settle a dispute rather than the last. The dispute that led to the murder of 11 campesinos in April apparently stemmed from an old problem

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in Guatemala -- the validity of common law rights based on custom versus legal ownership. Over half of the land rights in Guatemala are based on little or no documentation, but to the campesino custom and usage have legitimized his rights. However, with the modernization of land titles and the emphasis on documentation the campesino has frequently lost out to the rancher who has just purchased a land deed.

The murders are attributed to a dispute over water rights between nearby landowners and a small village in Chiquimula. The villagers have traditionally used the water from a stream running near their village, but the landowners who own the river bed had been trying to force the villagers to stop using the water. Then on April 19 around midnight a group of 10 heavily armed men "seized" the small village. The people were forced out of their homes and eight men were lined up against a wall and "executed." The village was then burned. Five days later three other campesinos were killed and one wounded in a nearby village.

When the leader of the band of hired killers was subsequently arrested he admitted that the campesinos had been killed because they ignored warnings to stop using the river water.

In addition to the 11 murders and one wounding above there were 14 other press-reported incidents of political violence in April, for a total of 26, up slightly from the 21 incidents in March, but still the seventh consecutive month that the total number of incidents remained below 30. However, all but four of the 26 incidents were murders.

The EGP issued a 9-page communique in which they accused the GOG of using Nicaraguan troops in El Quiche against the EGP. This charge has been made before and denied by the Government (see Guatemala 2430) and appears to be baseless.

Four military commissioners were killed during April, some or all of whom may have been victims of the EGP. Two assistant military commissioners were killed in El Quiche, the first known incidents in this department since January. A chief military commissioner was killed in San Marcos when two men on a motorcycle passed his pickup and opened

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fire with machine guns. A two-year-old child riding with him was also killed and two other passengers wounded. Another military commissioner was killed in Suchitepequez and a bomb set off in the home of a military commissioner in El Progreso caused considerable damage but injured no one.

Of the remaining six incidents three occurred in Guatemala, one in Chiquimula and two in San Marcos.

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